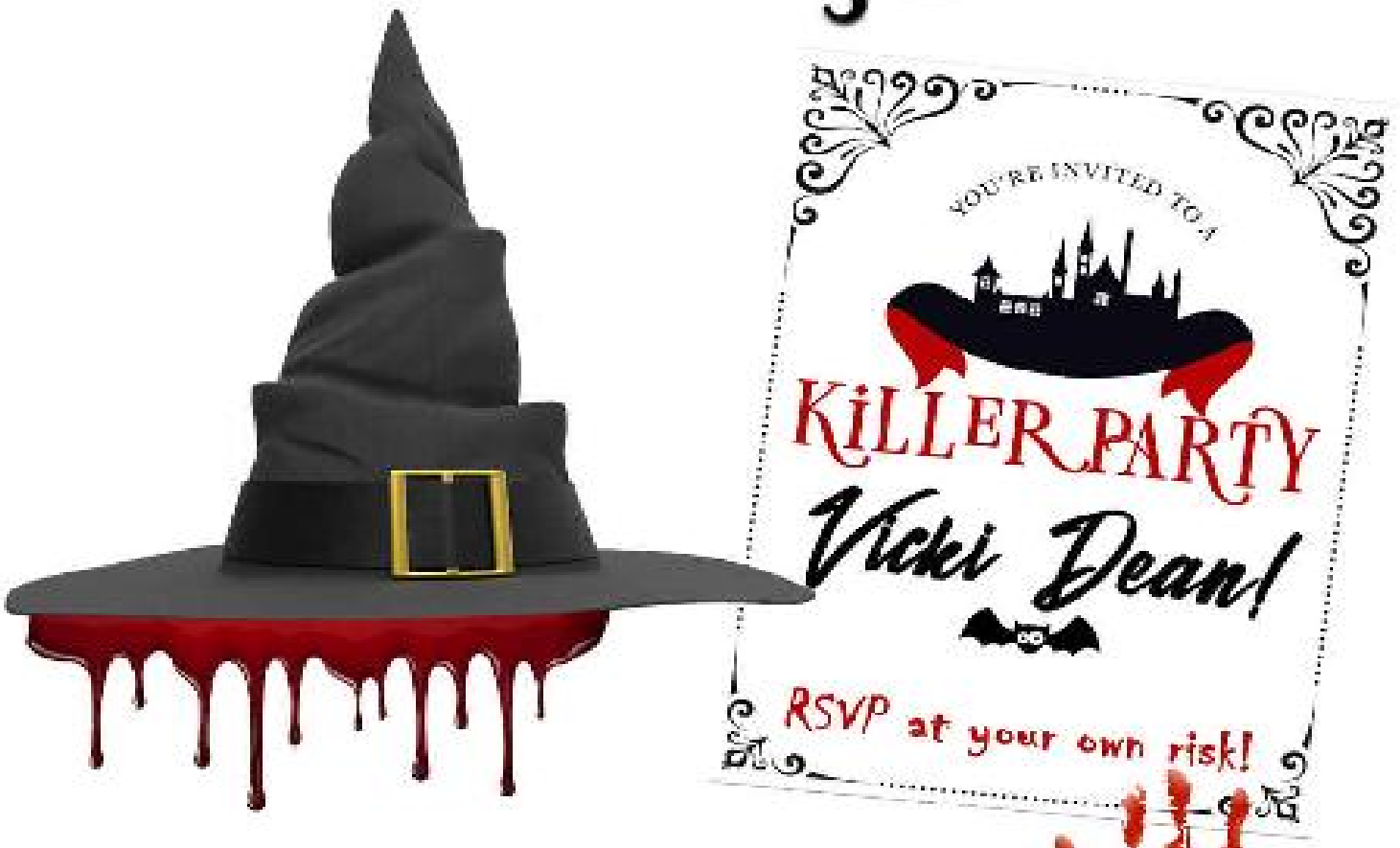
RICHES, B!TCHES & WITCHES



DRAG QUEEN DETECTIVE

SHANE K. MORTON

RICHES, B!TCHES, & WITCHES

Drag Queen Detective

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Also by Shane K Morton
About Shane K Morton

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Chapter One

THE BEGINNING

“Harper! Will you please hurry up?” I screamed up the stairs as loudly as I could. He had the Beach Boys blaring from the speakers, which was an odd choice for him. I knew it was going to become an earworm that would keep me up tonight. There’s nothing worse than California Girls trapped in your brain. “Don’t forget your information! Betty will be pissed!”

I walked over to the bar, pulling the small train of my incredibly heavy dress behind me before pouring myself a quick glass of champagne. I would need it. Tonight promised to be quite a pain in the ass – or fun. I was having a hard time deciding on which it would be. A Halloween murder mystery invite to a reportedly haunted mansion on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean sounded fun – in theory. But when you were a best-selling mystery author, the expectations of solving the mystery felt like a vice.

It was also being thrown by Betty Davis, the owner, and operator of Maple Bay’s radio station. She was quite wealthy and a formidable woman in this town. When I heard she was buying the old mansion, I thought it sounded fitting. The old place had been rented out to the Maple Bay Historical Society for years without anyone actually living in it. I heard they did ghost tours and paranormal investigations inside the mansion but had yet to ever go inside myself.

No one had lived there for over seventy years. I was surprised that it hadn't fallen into the ocean yet. But according to Cory, who used to sneak in when he was in high school, it was still in perfect shape, as if time had stood still inside Stonehouse Manor for the last century. I admit I was excited to finally see it. The mansion was a thing, a myth, and a mystery, which of course, I adored. What the truth was, I didn't know. But whatever it was, I was sure it wasn't the rumors and nonsense that the town treated as truth.

Lisandre Nepoli, the woman who built the house and lived in it until her death in 1924, was a name people whispered around this area. People went missing, and the small minds of the small town believed that she was involved in their disappearance. A witch was what they called her. Nonsense. I didn't believe in that kind of superstitious bullshit. Maybe Lisandre was a killer – or maybe she was a rich old woman who liked to be left alone. Why else would she build a mansion so far away from the only town within miles of her home? I understood the need to be a recluse, even if I stepped out into the limelight far too often.

Shit…

My face was beat to an inch of my life tonight. I had to don my Vicki drag before I could dress up as the character Betty had asked me to become for the party. A drag queen, pretending to be a woman – in real life – dressing up as a gothic serial killer Elizabeth Bathory. The dress I rented from a costume shop in San Francisco was the most uncomfortable dress I had ever worn. I was cinched into a corset, and the heavy fabrics they used weighed me down, not to mention the massive red wig that towered a foot above my head. How the hell did women live in these kinds of outfits? I was tottering and very happy that I could wear flats. If I had been in heels, I would have fallen over. As it was, navigating stairs was beyond treacherous.

“Harper!” I yelled again, knowing that if we didn’t leave in a few minutes, we would be late. I didn’t want to start Betty off tonight. I respected her, but I was a tad bit terrified of her, too. She had been sniffing around a lot lately, and I was afraid she was starting to put two and two together. If she found out that retired hairstylist and drag queen emcee, Victor Sommers, was actually novelist Vicki Dean, I would be ruined. That information had to come out at a time of my choosing instead of being picked up on AP because Betty found out the truth.

She commented recently to Cory how rare it was that Vicki and Victor were ever around each other. It was quite hard since we were the same person. I knew I couldn’t keep this up forever, and I didn’t really want to. But I wanted my coming out party to be on my terms and not Betty’s. She was the town's biggest gossip, except for Cory. The difference there was Cory didn’t have a radio station to announce anything and everything she wanted. Betty was ruthless. That is just another reason I admired her.

“I thought I could do this… But I don’t think I can. Betty must really hate me.” Harper’s deep voice rumbled from the top of the stairs.

“Oh, bitch, please. I’m wearing a corset and can barely breathe. I think she wants all of us to suffer.” I tried to take a deep breath – nope, I couldn’t do it.

“A corset? Well, that I’d like to see.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” I chuckled. “I’m also wearing a dress that weighs as much as a man. How women wore these things is beyond me. They really are the stronger sex.”

“Mmm… Sex.”

“Mind – the gutter. We have to get through this, one way or the other.”

“I think I like the other, better than the *other* way – because that means I have to show up to Betty’s event wearing this.”

“For fucks sake, Harper. What are you wearing?”

One of Betty's rules was that the other guests were not supposed to know who you were until the big reveal. After I received my character info and deep instructions as to how I was supposed to dress, I thought I already had it figured out. But knowing Betty, anything was possible.

"Nothing. That is what I'm wearing."

"Well, this I have to see. Besides, don't you want to see how fucking fantastic I look in this corset? Come on down, and let me see you."

I heard his feet on the stairs – but the sound was not what I was expecting. The flip-flop sound echoed. "You're not what I'm worried about. You've seen me in less, and trust me, this is not very much."

"Are you wearing a g-string?"

"Might as well be." Harper walked around the corner, and my jaw dropped to the floor. Perhaps my tongue hung out in a very lascivious way, too - and my tuck was threatening to come completely undone. Damn…

"Betty asked you to wear a bikini and to wear a whistle around your neck… Who are you again?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to share." I hated when he teased me. Now I had to know.

"Harper…"

"Fine, I'm that serial killer who was a lifeguard, Peter Moore. He took people home from the beach and drowned them in his tub. Seems like a real idiot. I mean, he left the ocean to drown someone. No wonder the moron was caught."

"And Betty asked you to dress like a…?" I gestured to his budgie smuggler.

"No, she sent the costume to me. I… uh… didn't open any of it up until tonight. I kept looking for the rest of it, but this is all there was." He smirked. "Should have opened the damn box earlier."

"You should bring a jacket. It might be cold in that old house." I giggled and pulled my train around behind me.

He raised his eyebrows, and I felt the dirtiness of that small gesture. “I really hope it is because looking at you right now… Damn. You are fucking perfect. Who are you?”

“I’m Elizabeth Bathory. She’s the greatest serial killer in all of history… Well, possibly. They really have no idea how many people she had killed. But I imagine she didn’t have to chase any of them. Trust me, she could not have run in this. It’s like wearing a suit of armor made of wool and Satin.” I walked up to him and placed my hand on his hard, smooth chest. His bright tattoos blazing against his tanned skin. “Maybe I need one more victim before I’m satiated, mister lifeguard, sir.”

“The things you are doing to me right now might rip this thing right off.” He moaned.

I slapped his bicep hard. “No time for play. I’ll kill you when we get back and immerse myself in your fluids.” I tried to walk away like the diva I was, but my foot caught the hem of the skirt, and I started to fall forward. Harper quickly caught me.

“Can we talk about these fluids you want me to bathe you in?” His whisper held a promise, and it was all I could do to stop myself from saying, fuck Betty’s party.

“We can. But perhaps, it should be in your car. I think we’ll need to turn the sirens on to get there in time.”

I had no idea what the night would hold. Hopefully, it would be fun. But I knew what was going to happen as soon as we got back home. If there was a God, this party would end quickly.

Chapter Two

THE GATHERING

Driving in the dark to a remote mansion that's supposedly haunted made all of the curves and swerves around the cliff face that much scarier. Harper, though, was the best driver I had ever ridden with. He also knew how nervous I got on this road. This was where our first adventure had ended, as my old friends and blackmailers drove through the guardrail to their death.

I still shivered when I thought of it. But time had made me see them in a different light. They had been my first friends in town and ones that I trusted and cared about. After they framed me for murder and held me at gunpoint, I stopped seeing them as friends, and their true nature came through. They were my enemies, but when I watched their car hurtle off the cliff… I mourned them as if I still loved them. Is it weird to admit that I missed them, even after all they had done? Greed turns a good person into someone you no longer recognized. But the loss stays the same.

We pulled up a long steep driveway that set hidden between the overgrown foliage. It was like stepping into one of my favorite novels. Perhaps Stonehouse Manor was a lot like Manderley, with mysteries around every corner? The trees created a canopy of sorts as we drove over the pothole-ridden drive. With every bump – my wig smashed into the top of the car. Hopefully, my drag-net would hold this perilous up-do that set

perched on top of my head. If it had been blue, I would look like Marge Simpson.

Finally, we hit the plateau, and the car glided up to the rest of the parked cars that surrounded the large circular drive in front of a house that took my breath away. It was a Victorian monster of a mansion and appeared in the moonlight to be in excellent shape. A small group of people were standing outside. Harper stopped the car and groaned.

“I can’t believe that I’m getting out of this car in a speedo.”

“Trust me, the town will only love you more.” I giggled. There were plenty of people in town that were sad to know the new sheriff had fallen in love with Victor. I saw the way a lot of people glanced at him wistfully, and I couldn’t blame them. Harper really was that hot – and he was all mine.

A knock on the passenger side window made me scream. I quickly glanced over to find my bestie with a chestier grinning at me in full drag. Long red curls adorned his head, and his bright red lipstick was garish in the moonlight. But he looked sick! I don’t know who beat his face within an inch of his life, but he was giving Hollywood starlet realness!

He opened my door and squealed. “Girl! You look like fucking Madonna during her Victorian Vogue number for the MTV Music Awards.”

“I don’t think Madonna is suffering as much as I am.” I held out my hand to Cory and got a full glimpse of his costume. The red dress fit him like a glove. His wide shoulders made him look like a football player in a dress, but he was still beautiful.

Cory took my hand and hauled me down from Harper’s truck. I picked up my small train and held it, as best I could, off the ground. I had rented this monstrosity and didn’t want to have to pay extra because it was filthy.

“I’m literally dying here. There’s a clown and… I hate clowns, Vick… Vicki. Oh, I guess we’re supposed to pretend we don’t know each other, huh?” Cory snickered and glanced over at his tall and hunky fiancé. These

two belonged together. They just looked perfect, standing next to each other in every way.

“That’s what the invitation said,” Jensen smirked. He stood there in a very tight suit that hid absolutely nothing. Totally disco – think John Travolta from Saturday Night Fever. His shirt was wide open and showed his muscular chest.

“Let me guess. Bette sent you your costume, too.” Harper sighed.

“No. I rented this at…” Jensen slapped his leg and pointed as Harper walked around the front of his truck. “Did you forget your costume?”

“Shut it.” Harper frowned. “This is what Betty sent me. I thought she did it to every…”

“All hail Halloween revelers!” We turned to the voice that called loudly from the porch and, as a small group, walked up to the others as we all stood in front of the wide porch where Betty stood in an evening gown. A dark veil covered her face. “Thank you for all attending the soiree where one of you will be unmasked as the killer you are. Please,” she gestured to the front door, “follow me into the parlor where all will be revealed, and the first round of cocktails will be served.”

“Do you know who any of the others are yet?” I whispered into Cory’s ear.

“We just got here a few minutes before you. But I’m almost positive that Tammy is the butch lesbian over there, and that means it’s probably Amy beside her dressed in that Little House on the Prairie dress with the lace collar.” Cory held out his hand and stopped us from ascending the stairs to the large porch. “Masks! We have to put on our masks. It’s the rules.”

We all slid on the black masks that Betty had provided for everyone. I had fixed mine around my neck before pulling on this gargantuan wig. I adjusted it and tried to stop the strap from catching the wig at the nape of

my neck. Harper gently reached behind me and placed the strap as high as he could.

“Thanks, babe.” I took his hand and followed Cory and Jensen into the large opulent mansion’s foyer. A large sweeping staircase loomed in front of us. I had to stop myself from gasping at how ornate it was. Betty must have done a lot of work inside the house since she bought it. It was gorgeous.

“All of the furniture is original to the house – as are all of the decorations and artwork that hangs on the wall. I haven’t had the artwork cleaned yet, so please do be careful. If you will follow me this way, please.” She turned and walked through a large round opening into a room that blazed with light. Two men dressed as butlers stood sentry with a tray of small glasses. We each took one upon entering, and the group scattered around the room. Some stood by themselves, and others stood in small groups.

It was a motley sight. The costumes ran the gamut from scary ass clown to regal empress. That was me. A doctor leaned against the fireplace, and a man in a cloak stood over in the corner, looking as if he felt completely out of place. Everyone looked so different that there wasn’t an easy guess as to how the costumes were chosen. I’m sure most people hadn’t quite figured it out yet, but from the costumes and the ornamentation on a few of them, I had a good guess. We were all notorious serial killers.

“Thank you all for attending my first annual Halloween soiree mystery adventure. Each of you came as I asked…” Betty glanced over at the witch and smirked. “Well, almost. But close enough. Your identities remain a mystery until the killer has been revealed.” She clapped her hands excitedly.

“Stonehouse Manor is rich with secrecy, legend, and gossip. When I built this house at the turn of the century, I had no idea that the town would eventually turn on me. I am Lisandre Nepoli, a rich immigrant who fled her home country to find peace here on the cliffs of Maple Bay. I lived here

with my family for years in peace with the settlers of this new town. It wasn't until children started disappearing that the Americans started pointing their fingers toward my home with fear. But like all of you, I was innocent. Or was I? Was I the prey, or was I the predator?" Betty cleared her throat. "Tonight, on this most auspicious holiday, the day the dead walk the Earth, we will see which of us is the ultimate predator – for one of you has come here to murder the others. In the game of serial killers, only one can be the ultimate killer. You have the cards that tell you what is expected of you." She looked down at us and clicked her tongue loudly.

"Do not stray from the card. The game is dependent on you doing what you're supposed to at the exact time listed. That means don't be late to the place you are supposed to be. There is a map on the back of your list to help you find your way in this large mansion, which I own."

"But to help you have a name while we all play, I have special nametags for you to wear. From the Major Arcana, I have chosen each of you. This will be who you are for the night – as killers, we all understand the need for secrecy and silence. You have no name, just a title."

She walked over to her left and peeled a sticker off her sheet. "This handsome man is The Devil. What did he do to deserve this moniker? Let's hope you don't find out. His deeds were dark and violent." She gave the sticker to the strong-jawed man, and he placed it on his shirt. I had no idea who he was. He wore street clothes that could have been from the seventies or the nineties – perhaps, even today.

"Next, we have The Emperor. First among many, but still an unknown." She gave the sticker to the person dressed like Jack the Ripper. That's the only person it could be. His cloak and top hat gave him easily away. It was a fantastic costume, though.

"Next, we have The Scientist. A butcher who, like Doctor Frankenstein himself, created what could have been a person from the bodies of others." The hat he wore looked like it was stitched together from the skin of people.

This one was almost too easy when you got a good look at him. I couldn't recognize who it really was, though. Maple Bay was a small town, but not small enough to figure real identities out easily. Whoever he was, he was portraying Ed Gein or Leatherface if you only knew him from those chainsaw movies.

"The Fool is next." Betty handed a sticker to the clown. His makeup was garish and terrifying. It was easy to see why people could be so afraid of clowns. But there was no doubt that this was John Wayne Gacy standing in the bright suit. "Don't trust the smile painted on his face. He is full of rage and anger."

"The two women standing here are made of nothing more than revenge. First, we have Justice." She handed Tammy - because it was definitely Tammy, her sticker. "Strong and powerful – her crimes even earned someone an Oscar. And next, we have The Hermit. She too dispensed what she deemed to be justice with an ax filled with her frustration and rage." I was pretty sure it was Amy. The way Tammy, who was Aileen Wuornos, looked at her told me the love they shared between them. I wouldn't have guessed her correctly if Betty hadn't mentioned the Oscar win for the character. Amy had to be Lizzie Borden, then.

"Next, we have The Hierophant and The Sadist." She handed the two tall men their stickers, and they carefully put them on their costumes. The Heirophant was most definitely The Zodiac killer since he had the symbol emblazoned on a t-shirt. "I said you should wear a robe. But It'll do." Her sneer made Tammy giggle. "One is still an unknown, while the other's deeds left a mark on history as America's first prolific murderer." So that meant the man with the suit and bowler hat was H.H. Holmes. I had always found him interesting and even thought about writing a story where someone was trying to copycat him. I scrapped it in the end.

"The motley crew before me are filled with horrific deeds. The Tower, a symbol of strength and safety, was a con to his victims. He was indeed as

swift as the tide as he ended his victim's life with his strong hands." Harper took the name tag and held it as he decided where he should put it. "It goes on your speedo, dear," Betty whispered and smirked as Harper placed it right over his crotch with a smile.

"Well, that will bring attention to all the wrong spots," Jensen chuckled.

"Yes… I think it will." Betty grinned and handed Jensen his sticker. "Next, we have The Moon, a killer who bedded each of his victims before strangling them to death. He was a gigolo who would do anything to get ahead." The Gigolo Killer! I had completely forgotten about that San Francisco legend. He wormed his way into high society and made a fortune stealing jewelry after he bedded and murdered his victims.

"And these two cunning and ruthless women each relished in the blood of their victims. The Lover," Betty handed Cory his nametag. "She murdered eleven husbands before she was finally captured. "The Empress, a cold and ruthless royal who bathed in the blood of her victims. Perhaps The Empress has the highest body count of all the killers combined. History can only guess." I placed the nametag on my gown and smiled at Betty, who winked.

"Is your boo feeling any better?" Betty whispered to Harper, who nodded. We had told her that Victor had the flu. I mean, I couldn't be in two places at once, and Betty would have lost her mind if Vicki Dean hadn't shown up.

"And the last… Perhaps the scariest of all. The Magician. Like me, they called her a witch, but was it true, or was it all smoke and mirrors. Only her victims know." Betty handed her a costume and patted the tall person on the arm. "That costume is amazing" Indeed it was. A long black cloak that seemed to be older than the house we stood in, along with a hood, hid the person's identity. I had no idea who this person was supposed to be. Maybe someone from Salem? But I didn't know a mass murderer who was a witch. Betty must have done some deep research for this game.

“Always keep your sticker on, and if speaking to each other, use the name I’ve given you from the Major Arcana. Once an hour, the lights will go out, and one of you will die. After each death, we all meet back here, minus the corpse, to take a guess as to who the killer might be. I will tell you if you are right or wrong. Then you go back to the game and search for the clues. Once again, stay to the schedule you have been given. I worked hard on this shit, so do **not** fuck it up.”

“Oh, and I wouldn’t try to go into the basement. The stairs are off of the kitchen, and they have not been fixed yet. The door’s locked, but some of you may try to get in anyway. Don’t. They could collapse with too much weight.” She glanced over at me. I knew who she was alluding to. “This house was in excellent shape – which was a huge surprise, but I’ve had Maple Bay contractors in here fixing it up for the last eight months. Everywhere else is safe, if not a little dingy in certain places.” She smirked and stuck her tongue up to the top of her lip. She looked like a frog on a red wig catching a fly.

“Does everyone still have their cocktail?” Betty hefted her glass into the air. “Here’s to a fun night of mystery. Which of the serial killers among us is the monster of all monsters? One of you…” she giggled. “Well, all of you are murderers, but tonight, only one of you has a taste for blood. Let’s finish our cocktails before the game starts at the stroke of the clock, which can be heard all over the house. The great grandfather clock was brought over from Europe and has been in Lisandre’s family for generations. It was in perfect working order, like most of the quirky possessions she owned. It was as if she had never left. Be careful, and let’s have fun! I await you on the stroke of the hour!”

Betty turned and walked out of the parlor accompanied by the two servers. I suppressed my giggle. This was a little much and possibly overwrought.

“I’m so excited.” Cory jumped once in his heels as they clicked against the hardwood floor. “I’ve always wanted to do one of these mystery games.”

“Honey, our life has become one giant murder mystery game with real consequences and actual dead bodies. I wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t begged.” Jensen looked as annoyed as I felt. He was right.

“You liked the way I begged, though, didn’t you?” Cory twirled daintily. Well, as daintily as those broad, muscular shoulders would allow.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Jensen grinned and pointed at Harper and laughed loudly. “Besides, this I am glad to see. If it weren’t for the whistle, I might think you are about to work the pole at Ramrod.”

“Alright, alright. I get it. I’m in a bikini.”

“It could have been a thong.” I giggled and placed my hand on his bulging bicep. “I’m happy to have something to look forward to when I see you during the game. I’m keeping my eye out on you, hot stuff.”

I jumped out of my skin as the clock started chiming so loudly. I had no doubt it could be heard from an ocean freighter a mile away, much less through the house.

“Let the games begin. Hi, Miss Dean.” Tammy winked as she walked by, striding in only the way she could. I loved her self-assurance. Good for her. It was nice to see her and Amy so happy. They were always coming to Rumors for the drag shows every week.

“And so it begins. Hurry up and solve this, will you? I really want to put on some pants.” Harper pulled out his card, and we all went our separate ways as we followed the directions given to us.

Chapter Three

THE SCIENTIST

Betty's directions were clear and concise for every hour the game lasted. I was to go upstairs and search the west wing of the mansion. Bedrooms, mainly, and a few bathrooms. I had to be in the far bedroom before the clock chimed seven.

I pulled out my cell phone from the pocket that, thankfully, the designer had been smart enough to add and set my alarm. That would give me five minutes to get where I was supposed to be.

Stairs…

I pulled up the hem of my dress and carefully walked up the opulent staircase. Betty really should rent this place out for weddings. The picture would be stunning. It reminded me in a lot of ways of the staircase in the classic horror film Mommie Dearest. We used to go to screenings of that film in San Francisco at The Castro Theatre, where we all treated it as the new Rocky Horror. We screamed back at the characters and quoted their lines, at least the ones we considered classic, along with the actors. If you have never seen that movie with over a hundred gay men having the time of their lives, you are missing out.

Halfway up. Damn… This dress was so heavy it was making me breathe hard as I hefted it and climbed the monstrous staircase. I should ask

Cory to start working out with me. All of the sitting in front of my computer was starting to make me quite out of shape.

Ever since I gave up my career as a beautician, I have noticed a slip in my physical health. Being on my feet for a lot of my time had kept me in good shape, along with rehearsing my drag numbers for the shows. Now, writing was my main pastime. I didn't spend anywhere near enough time on my drag performances. I had become one of those queens who always did a ballad, which meant I didn't have to work up a sweat. Being the emcee was not a lot of work. Perhaps I should shake it back up and start working harder on my life once a week, as Raven Ravonne. She deserved some attention after the last year we had experienced.

Vicki had taken more and more of my time. That needed to change.

Soon… It had to change soon.

Thank God! I finally reached the landing. If Betty had made me climb up to the third floor, I think I would have had to sit down and catch my breath. I glanced down the long corridors. Jensen and a couple of others were making their way down the east wing of the house. I glanced at the map. More bedrooms and a sitting room… How many bedrooms did this place have?

I turned towards the hallway and saw a couple of people chatting as they stared over at me. Ed Gein was one of them. His mask was just as garish in the dim light upstairs as it was in the glowing brightness of the parlor. Lizzy Borden was the other. She giggled at whatever was being said to her.

"The woman of the hour." Amy smiled as they watched me approach. "I imagine we're all expecting you to win at a mystery game, Miss Dean."

"I thought our identities were supposed to be a secret," I answered throatily. "Looks like I'm not doing a very good job."

"Oh, Betty told all of us that you were coming. I suppose beating you in a game like this would be a feather in someone's cap." Watching that mask

while he spoke was quite terrifying.

“Well, don’t expect too much. I can barely move in this gown. I think she wanted me at a disadvantage.” I frowned. I couldn’t place his voice, and the mask prevented his real face from being shown.

“What are we really supposed to be doing? I mean, I knew this was a game, but I think I expected more cocktails and less walking… I mean, a death every hour? How long is this going to take?” Lizzy, who I knew to be Amy, sounded like she was already tired of playing, and we had just started.

“We’re supposed to look for clues.” Ed shrugged.

“What kind of clues? We don’t really know what the mystery even is yet?”

“It’s always murder.” I walked by them. “I say we each choose a bedroom and… look around.”

“But what are we actually looking for? How do we know what’s a clue – or what’s just a hairbrush?” Amy sighed as she stopped at the first door. “I guess I’ll start here. See you later.”

“I’ll take this one, I suppose. It does feel weird poking around in people’s stuff, though. Even if the old lady has been dead for a long time. Betty would want us to be nosy, wouldn’t she?” Ed walked into the next room and left me alone in the hallway.

Indeed – Betty was the most nosy person I had ever met, possibly. She would root through your trash if she thought she could get some juicy gossip to share with her listeners. I knew that for a fact. Cory now took all of my trash to the city dump himself, just so I could be sure that there wasn’t anything there that could link Victor and Vicki together.

I walked into the next room and gasped.

Sweet Brittany Spears!

This bedroom was a floral nightmare. Shades of pink and purple splashed across anything that would stay still. The bedspread and walls blended into a garish catastrophe of design. Even the curtains matched the

same hideous print. God… It was horribly spectacular in a marvelous Victorian way.

The furniture, though, was quite beautiful. A dark mahogany four-poster bed set against the far wall, with a matching chifforobe and dresser. These were some serious antiques from the Victorian period, and if every room in this house held the same kind of furniture, Betty had bought herself quite a lot of equity in furnishings alone. People would pay thousands of dollars for just one of these bedroom sets. I glanced down at the map. According to this handy dandy sheet – this house had twelve bedrooms. That was insane.

I slowly turned around to look at the room. It wasn't overly large or very small. It was quite a normal sized room, even by today's standards. Not for a master suite, of course, but for an extra bedroom… Normal. There were no other doors – so this room didn't connect to a bathroom or have a closet, which was fairly typical for old homes that hadn't been renovated.

I walked over to the dresser and opened a drawer. Empty. I did the same with the other seven drawers and shut them just as quickly. Nothing to find inside the dresser. Of course, who knew what a clue might be at this point. Maybe the empty drawers were a clue? Or maybe Betty bought too big of a house?

I giggled to myself. I really needed a drink or some company. It would have been nice if Cory and I could have been together for this exploration. He made everything a little more fun than it actually was. I was the luckiest drag queen in the world to have him as my friend. Cory was a golden retriever – loyal, caring, and as loving as you could find. I knew he considered himself lucky to have met me. But I knew better. I was the lucky one.

The door of the chifforobe creaked loudly. A lone white nightgown hung inside made of lace and satin. It looked incredibly old. Was this actually one of Lisandre Nepoli's nightgowns - or something Betty found at an antique sale? Either way, it was gorgeous. I reached out and felt the satin

with my fingers. So beautiful and well made that I had to take a moment to appreciate it.

Why was it here? The only thing in this old mahogany chifforobe was this lone nightgown on a very new pink hanger. That meant it was placed here recently. That meant Betty meant it for a clue. Was the killer a girl? Maybe… Perhaps the killer liked girls? I shut the door. It was a crappy clue – a red herring designed to make you think when it was actually something that meant nothing. Most clues were, in the end. We create stories around the things we find to try to…

Now, that was interesting.

As the light from the overhead light reflected against the inside of the door, something caught the corner of my eye. I opened the door again and moved the nightgown aside.

On the back of the dark wood was an etching of some kind. It was feint but firmly carved into the back of the hardwood. A circle with a triangle… You could see where the wood had aged and darkened inside the lines carved maybe close to a hundred years ago. If the lines were new, they would have been brighter and more yellow in the mahogany. These were shadowed and dark as time seeped the life slowly from them. The stain – the protectorate of the wood was removed, and now time would slowly erode where someone had carefully carved.

I placed my finger on the etching and felt carefully around it. What did it mean? Why had someone carved this many years ago? It was a symbol I had never seen before, but there were many symbols I had never seen before.

The occult? Lisandre was reported to be a witch by a very scared town almost a hundred years ago. I rolled my eyes. There were no things like witches and ghosts in the world. Only Wiccans who practiced what they practiced, but I did not believe in magic. Nor did I believe in ghosts or poltergeists. The supernatural was a fabulous fantasy, but it ended there.

Part of me wished Bigfoot was real. But he wasn't. We had already experienced too much of the world for there to be a giant…

I shut the door and peered around the back. Nothing. Empty space where it sat in the corner of the room.

I bent down and glanced under the bed. I even moved the pillows and slowly pulled back the dusty floral quilt.

Nothing.

I shut the door behind me and walked to the next room.

My alarm beeped.

How much time had I spent examining that room? It had felt like ten minutes. Did it take me that long to trudge up the stairs? It couldn't have!

Five minutes… shit!

I walked down the long hallway and passed the last four doorways as if they meant nothing. Whatever clues may have waited inside would not be found by me. I was proving to be a fallible detective in Betty's game. How had an hour passed by so quickly?

In a few minutes, a fake murder would be committed. Would it be me who was the victim? Knowing Betty, she would love to bring me down a peg or two, but that might ruin her fun, wouldn't it? She wanted me out – maybe, but she needed me to be the foil for everyone else. I wouldn't be the first victim. But I knew, somewhere down the line, she had her sights set on me.

And why not? Same thing with Harper and Jensen. When the professionals were in the game but fell along the way, t made it more fun for the normal people simply playing along. How much would Tammy like to outfox Vicki Dean and solve the mystery before she could? I knew the answer and completely understood it. I used to feel the same way until I became who I pretended to be.

I opened the door, and standing against the far wall was whoever was dressed as Ed Gein.

“We meet again, Miss Dean.” He nodded his head. “Shit! This mask is so hard to fucking see in.”

“It’s very well made. Honestly, it freaks me out – it looks so real.” I walked into the blue bedroom and glanced around. Only a bed and dresser were in there. The blank walls made our voices echo.

“Yeah, it was in the package with my invitation. I wouldn’t know where to even find something like this. Betty must have spared no expense, I guess.” He shrugged and slumped against the wall as he stood. “I hate scary movies. Shit – I hate Halloween, except for the leftover candy. I prefer my holidays with less blood and guts, if you know what I mean?”

“I do. I actually love the holiday, but I’ve never been a big believer if what you can’t see or hear. All of the hocus pocus… It’s rather stupid.” I sat down gently on the bed. My body felt an instant sense of release from the heavy garments I wore.

“So, which of us is the killer?” Ed chuckled. “Two people in one room… I mean, you have to agree the odds are not in one of our favor. I would guess that since I know I am not the killer, that means you are?”

“I have no idea what you mean. I’m not the killer. But I will agree that the two of us being together is…”

The clock started chiming, and the lights went out.

I waited patiently for whatever was about to happen. If I was to be the first to fall, maybe that meant I could sit down and relax with a cocktail while everyone else scrambled about in their search for fun. All I wanted was to put my feet up and…

Ed’s scream caught me completely off guard, and I flew off the bed quickly, standing rigid in the darkness. “Ed? Are you alright? That actually sounded like you were in pain.”

A groan cut through the darkness.

“Ms. Dean… Why did that… How did you get over here so quickly?”

“Ed, that wasn’t me. I…”

“It’s Parker from the bank, Miss Dean. You know the one who…”

“Of course, I know who you are, Parker. You set up all of my business accounts.”

“It feels wet… Am I?”

The lights flared back to life, and I glanced quickly around. Parker and I were alone. His Ed Gein mask was off, and he lay on the floor curled up. I ran to him and fell to my knees.

“Where does it hurt?”

“My back…” He rolled over, and I gently raised the back of his shirt. My hand flew to my mouth… The symbol. That same symbol… The welts on Parker’s back were raised, and I gently lowered his shirt back down. It looked as if someone had used their fingernail to scrape the skin into that same circular pattern with a triangle inside. Small droplets of blood peppered his skin.

Someone needed to have a conversation with Betty. This game had stopped being fun.

Chapter Four

THE FOOL

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Betty snarled. “I had nothing to do with that… that… burn on his back. You were the one in the room with him.”

Parker Jones pulled his shirt back down and covered up the mark that had been imprinted on his back.

“I didn’t say that you did it, Betty.” I lowered my voice. “But I find it quite odd that the same mark is carved into a piece of furniture.”

Betty reached over at patted Parker on the arm. “I’m sorry that I snapped. It’s just… Well, this is not what I was expecting. I’ve seen that same design in a few places, actually. But for it to appear on your skin… like that is…”

“Unsettling,” I finished the sentence for her. “I thought perhaps he was the first victim.”

“No.” Betty pointed to the man dressed as John Wayne Gacy. He had a piece of red duct tape with an X on it placed on his costume. “Mark was the first to die, and as you can see, I made the game fairly easy.”

“Was there anyone else in the room with us, Parker? I didn’t see anyone or hear anything until you yelled in pain.”

“No… I think we were alone, Vicki.” He shrugged and shuffled his feet. He was shaken up by what had happened, and so was I. “What’s weird is…

I didn’t feel anyone touch me. It was like it just appeared.”

“And it’s already fading.” I nodded. The mark was bright red when I first saw it – now it was light pink.

“I would wonder if it was an allergic reaction to the mask or the shirt. I mean, I didn’t wash it. But that didn’t feel like allergies. It felt like I was being branded.”

“What do you want to do, Parker? I understand if…”

“I’m here, Betty – and honestly, I was having fun. It doesn’t hurt anymore, not really. It’s just a little tender, like a scratch or something.”

“Alright then, let’s go over to the others and get this mystery back on track.” Betty turned, and Parker followed behind as they joined the others.

Harper glanced over at me. I needed to tell him what had happened, but honestly, I had no idea what to even say. How did something like that happen? It didn’t, did it? Maybe Parker was right, and it was some kind of reaction. The house was old, and perhaps he rubbed against something that caused the inflammation?

There had to be some kind of logical explanation. But…

I didn’t need to find it. This was something I had to let go of. Needing to find the answer to whatever question plagued my brain was a serious character flaw. Counseling had helped me in more ways than I had ever imagined.

I sighed heavily and lifted my heavy dress before walking back to join the others.

“Why were you staring at Parker’s back.” Harper raised his eyebrows. He loved to tease me.

“He was showing me his new tattoo,” I lied. There was no reason to go into it. I’d remember to pat myself on the back later.

“So… We have our first victim of the night.” Betty pointed to John Wayne Gacy. “The Fool has been murdered, and he was stabbed to death

inside the library. That is the only information that you are to be given." She walked over and pulled him to the front. "Reveal yourself."

"What?" His scary clown face frowned. Watching his painted-on smile as it grimaced was quite disconcerting.

"Tell them who you are." Betty rolled her eyes.

"Oh! I'm Dennis Johnson."

People clapped. Dennis served on the town council, and I had to suppress my giggle. Betty had chosen well in naming him the fool. He was a jolly man who always had a smile plastered in place as he shook everyone's hand that he came into contact with. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't run for mayor sometime soon. He was always a politician.

"Dennis, you are done for the night in regards to the game. If you walk into those doors, it will take you to a small lounge where food and drink await." She clapped her hands together.

Dennis waved. "I am starving. You did say there would be food. I'll see the next victim soon."

We watched him walk through the doors. You could hear a pin drop.

"Would anyone like to make a guess as to the killer's identity?" Betty looked around, proud of the game she had created for us.

No one said anything.

"I think it's too early to point the finger at someone. We would need some kind of proof." I replied, hoping it would move the game along. The charm of what we were doing had worn off quickly.

"Then turn to your card and let the game continue." Betty bounced on her feet excitedly.

As everyone moved away from the large foyer, I glanced down to lift my dress and gasped.

On the floor in the main entrance was a design in the tile. A circle with a triangle – the same design I had now seen twice. Maybe I had been too hasty. Perhaps this was something we needed to know more about.

Chapter Five

THE MAGICIAN

“Bitch, you look worried,” Cory placed his hand on my shoulder as we walked to our next stop in Betty’s game. “Where are you going? I had a lot of fun looking around this place. I found this.”

He pulled out a tarot card from his pocket. The sun blazed upon it with its golden rays.

“Where did you find it?”

“It was in a jewelry box. I thought it had to be a clue of some kind. If everyone is named after tarot cards, this has to mean something.”

“I agree. I don’t really know a lot about tarot, though. Do you know what any of this means?”

“I know it’s a good card. I think it’s positivity or something like that. I’ve had my cards read a few times at Wolfe’s Tie Die. Sarah knows a lot about this stuff. I only remember the sun because I’ve gotten it every time, and she always seems excited when she sees it and smiles at me.”

“Girl, I don’t know. But this wig is starting to itch like shit.” I tried to gently scratch on the edge. “Fucking cheap ass wig.”

“Oh, shit. Mine is real hair. When I got the invitation, I went right out and bought it.”

“I can’t believe you got your first wig and didn’t even take me with you.”

“It had to be a secret. I mean, it’s fun and everything to play dress up, but I’m giving this wig to you for Raven to use if you want it. I don’t think I’m meant to be a drag queen.”

“Who beat your face? Did you do it your…”

“You know I didn’t.” He cackled. “Vivienne Westworld helped me out. She said I looked like Tom Brady in lipstick.”

“Well, a little,” I smirked. “I’m supposed to go this way.” I pointed down the corridor. “Betty gave me the library where the murder took place.”

“Me too!” He bounced in his heels. “Ok, ouch… My feet are already killing me.”

“Honey, your rhinestone tennis shoes would have looked fabulous with this dress.”

“Now she tells me… Come on. Let’s see what kind of clues we can find.” He opened the heavy door, and I stopped him. I reached out and traced the same weird symbol I had now found in three other places on the door. The carving was ornate, and if you weren’t looking for it, you might have missed it. How many other times had I walked by that symbol and not noticed?

Cory looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

“Have you seen this symbol before?”

“I mean… It’s familiar. Seems like some kind of logo or something.”

“Yeah… Kind of. If you see them let me know, ok?”

“You are worried about something? Shit… Please tell me that you don’t think someone is actually going to die? I’m over having my fun interrupted by a dead body.” Cory looked at me so seriously I grinned and placed my palm against his sweet face.

“No… It’s just… Well, something a little strange happened when I was with Ed Gein.”

“Everyone knows that’s Parker. He slouches, unlike anyone else I have ever seen. Can we go in?”

I nodded, and he opened the door again.

Wow…

The library was a massive room filled with old books. Ornate engravings surrounded the built-in bookcases that went from floor to ceiling. A library ladder rested upon the metal railing for someone to use if they wanted to get a book from the top shelves. This was incredible.

A large desk that matched the bookcases was set in the middle of the room. A fainting couch not far away was placed against the large window, which must look out on the front of the house. It was as fancy as the rest of the house – maybe more. One day, I would have to beg Betty to let me come and look at the books that Lisandre had on her shelves.

“I’ll check out the desk. Open the drawers and see if Betty hid anything in there.” Cory bounced over in his very Cory way. In heels. He was *my* bitch!

“I’m going to look at the bookcases. See if anything was placed around there. If the clue you found was a tarot card, there’s a good chance that there could be more. It seems to be the theme of the night.” I walked over and looked at the first shelf. Some of the titles were in Italian. Well, that clocked correctly with the last name Nepoli. It sounded Italian.

Truthfully, I’m not sure that anyone in town knew anything about the Nepoli family. They had all died or moved away many years ago. Lisandre’s name was now only spoken about with the status of legend and gossip. The joy of living in a small town.

The symbol was everywhere in the engraving. Maybe it was the family crest? That was a very European thing, and they immigrated here when this town was barely existent. They would have embraced some of their heritage, wouldn’t they?

“Nothing in here.” Cory shut the desk drawer. “If we’re in this room, I know there has to be something we are supposed to find. It’s where the murder happened. I’m surprised there’s not a body outline in tape or something… That would help with where we should be looking.”

“There’s nothing on this bookcase except a collection that should be in a museum. I bet these books are worth a…”

“Look up there!” Cory screamed happily. His excitement about life was one of my favorite things about him. “That book is pushed out on the top shelf. That has to be on purpose.”

“There is no way I can climb a ladder in this dress. I think Betty is trying to murder me.” I chuckled – sounding much more like Victor than Vicki Dean. “Figures.”

Cory kicked off his heels and pulled the ladder over. It groaned heavily. “Don’t worry, bitch. I got this. Well…” He tried to scoot the ladder a little closer. “Fuck – it’s stuck. I think I can reach it.”

He ascended the ladder, and I glanced up and cackled.

“Honey, are you wearing boxer briefs under that dress? Did you even tuck?”

“No fucking way am I putting duct tape on my… Hold on.” He reached for the book and hung from the ladder on one foot. It was a little too scary for me.

“Please be careful, boo!”

His hand grasped the spine of the book, and he steadied himself back on the ladder with both feet. “News at eleven. Man in dress plummets to his death in a haunted library.”

“What is it?” I put my hand on his ass as he descended, just in case he slipped. I breathed a sigh of relief when his stocking feet touched the floor. He handed the book to me.

“Here you look. I gotta squeeze my feet back into these torture devices.” He plopped down on the floor and started struggling with the

heel.

I opened the book and looked through it. It was old, and it sure smelled like it.

“This isn’t actually a book. It’s someone’s handwriting. It’s kind of hard to read.” I flipped back to the cover. There, in a flourished script, was the name Lisandre Nepoli. “Wow! This looks like Lisandre’s diary or something. I don’t think this was actually a clue. I think it was just there. Seems like she hid it away on the top shelf. Weird.”

“What does it say?” he asked as the door creaked.

I glanced backward quickly to see the cloak of the witch, whoever that was, exiting out the door. How long had she been here? I didn’t remember hearing the doors open.

“Who was that?” Cory asked. “Was that the witch. She kind of freaks me out. I wish I knew who it was. That costume has a weird odor to it. I was standing near her earlier.”

“I don’t know. But I guess we will have to ask if this is a clue or a priceless heirloom that we shouldn’t be carrying around.” I thought for a second about sneaking the book out. I would actually love to get a chance to peruse it and see if there wasn’t some kind of answer to the mystery of this family. As I said – I had a hard time not finding the answer to a question that plagued me.

I don’t know…

The chimes of the clock rang loudly, and the lights went out. Cory reached out and grabbed my hand.

“Girl, you better not be trying to kill me!” I giggled.

“Never. Sisters don’t do that.”

The lights came back on. There were no screams – I felt my shoulders unclench.

Not every question needed to be answered.

Chapter Six

THE HIEROPHANT AND THE SADIST

As we walked down the hallway to the gathering. I glanced through the diary, flipping toward the end. She mentioned the disappearances around the area and knew the townspeople were pointing their finger up the mountain toward her house. She was an outsider, and her family was more reclusive than the others. She was scared.

Dammit! I really just wanted to sit down in a corner away from everyone else and read this diary. It might not solve the mystery that Betty had laid out before us, but it was now all I could think about.

Here was a history of a woman that the town demonized. They called her a witch, and if it would have been a hundred years earlier, they may have even hung her without cause. She was an outcast from the civilization growing around her. It had to be lonely. She made that trip all the way across the Atlantic and then across a new country over a hundred years ago. What courage and strength that had to take.

I slid the book down into the pocket of my dress. There would be time to show it to Betty and give it back to her later. Maybe there was a story here that needed to be told. Perhaps if the truth of her life was in this book, her name would then be said with the awe and fortitude that she deserved? She should be celebrated – not spoken of with fear and prejudice.

She had been different.

But that didn’t make her a killer – or a witch.

“So…” Betty clapped her hands. We have another victim of the murderer. The Devil has been taken down. Ted Bundy, please reveal yourself.”

Ted pulled off his mask, and standing before us was our old friend Hank who ran the bar I performed at as Raven Ravonne once a week. He was the best bartender in the country.

“Hank!” Cory squealed. “I thought I recognized that chin and your tarnished soul.”

“Your boyfriend had his hand on my ass all night. Tell him to leave the change on the dresser, ho.” Hank and Cory were always nothing but snarky with each other. It almost sounded mean unless you knew them. They absolutely adored each other.

“Hank, please join our other deceased victim in the waiting room and enjoy a cocktail. You deserve it after being stabbed thirteen times.” Betty gestured to the door, and Hank, without a word, quickly walked to it. “Ted was murdered in the dining room on top of the large grand table, almost like a sacrifice. Did anyone find anything that they might think is a clue that you would want to share?”

“I found this.” Harper held out a glove. It was a black cotton glove, and it had red paint all over the fingers. It was lying in the hallway halfway down past the library. His chest heaved as he handed it to Betty. I wanted to rush over and place kisses all over it. His bulge in those shorts was starting to drive me crazy again. Wouldn’t that have been the gossip that drove this town crazy. Vicki Dean molesting the sheriff at Betty’s party when his boyfriend wasn’t around… Yeah, that couldn’t happen. I was trying to keep my distance. He was too hot to handle, and I couldn’t – shouldn’t even ogle him. Life wasn’t fair.

“I found a sun tarot card in a jewelry box in one of the upstairs bedrooms. There was nothing else that I saw up there.” Cory huffed

proudly.

“Hmmm… The sun card and a disposed of glove. Anyone else?” Betty looked over at me. I shrugged.

“I thought our lady detective would have found something by now.” She pursed her lips.

Now I knew I was going to keep this diary to myself.

“Anyone else?” She waited, and no one said anything. “If you keep them to yourself, you may not be able to put the pieces together. Or is it a strategy to not share and let everyone else while you keep your cards close? I guess we will see. Does anyone want to take a guess?”

“I will.” The Hierophant raised their hand. A very feminine voice that I recognized but couldn’t place without more info rang through my ears. “I think it’s the sheriff… er… that lifeguard person, because he is killing me right now.” She chuckled.

“Ha! Is that an actual guess?” Betty asked as she smirked over at Harper.

“Might as well be.” Jensen shrugged. “He was near both victims when they died. I mean, he was in the next room. He could have easily had time to move in quickly.”

Harper grinned. “What can I say… I’m following the directions. But how could I see in the dark? I mean, this place gets pitch black. I have nowhere to hide some kind of goggles to see with. Nor am I hiding those red X’s in my crotch.”

“That’s a good point,” Jensen smirked.

“How is the killer able to find the victim? Harp… The Tower is right.” I nodded, putting the pieces together. “Whoever is the killer must have some kind of night vision goggles to be able to see. Was there anyone else near Hank? Who was with John Wayne Gacy when he died?”

Everyone looked at each other, and no one said anything. Finally, Amy, The Hermit, stepped forward. “I was in the next room to The Fool when he

was murdered, and I was alone."

"Anyone else?" Betty waited. "I guess that's all the answers you're going to get this round. See you at the next murder."

I thought about hiding and looking at the diary. But I didn't want to draw attention to it yet. I flipped my card over. The parlor was to be my next stop. It was near the dining room. At least I didn't have to climb any fucking stairs. At least no one else had come down with a mysterious rash.

I floated into the parlor in a wistful daze. The game might have been fun if mysteries didn't plague my life already. But I couldn't stop thinking about the diary and the story of Lisandre. Inside the folds of my dress was her life, in her own words. Maybe there were more diaries of hers on that bookshelf? Perhaps her whole life could be laid bare for the town to finally know the truth of one of their own. One they spurned over a century ago.

"Excuse me." A hand rested on my back. "I almost knocked you down."

"Did you just kill me with a red X?" I turned to find The Hierophant - or the Zodiac killer beside me. We were too close to San Francisco, and the Zodiac could still be alive. So even their presence and not knowing who was under the hood scared me. Out of all the killers present in Betty's game, the Zodiac was the only one who hadn't paid for their crimes. All of the others were caught. Was that a clue?

"I did not. Promise," the soft voice answered, and I immediately knew who it was. It was the lilt of her voice, always so wistful and wise. "Sara? Is that you?"

"For goodness sake, Vicki, don't let Betty know I told you. She's taking this game way too seriously. This hood is so hot that I am roasting in here."

"Cory had just told me he wished you were here so you could answer his question about the sun card he found. He said it was always a good card?"

"It's the card I always associate with Cory. He gets it every time because he is a delightful ray of sunshine himself. Yeah, it's always a good

card. It could stand for pregnancy, optimism, positivity… Any of the good things in life. But as always, its meaning can change by where its position is in the reading. Let's be honest, Vicki, if Betty has made these clues and she's using tarot cards… Who knows where she got her meanings for them. She probably used Google." Sara snorted.

"Find anything yet?" A snide voice from behind made me jump. I turned to find H.H. Holmes, The Sadist, behind me. I knew who was behind that mask. He had asked me many questions during my time in Maple Bay. That was Ralph Sevalas from The Maple Gazette. He had been one of the first to point the finger at me when the mayor died a couple of years ago. He had yet to apologize.

"Not a thing." I walked over and sat down on one of the high-backed chairs, and pulled the book from my pocket. "Feel free to look around. I'm just going to sit here for a minute. My feet are killing me."

"Your feet and my face. It's crazy that the Zodiac was never caught. In this hood, I have no idea how he would have even been able to see. You would think his breath would have fogged up his glasses. I'll go over here and check out this side." Sara wandered over to the far wall.

I pulled out the book and scanned through it quickly. Lisandre mentioned the disappearances and was worried about her own family. Some of them had never learned to speak English, so they all stayed up near their mountain home. Lisandre wouldn't even let the children outside unless she could be with them. She was scared.

Her parents had been wealthy back in Italy, and when she and her family decided to move to America, they came with almost nothing but what they could carry. The journey was hard, and they knew the trek to the West Coast would be dangerous. Her husband died halfway, and she only had her Aunt and brother to help raise her two kids.

They chose this place to build their house because it reminded them of their home back in Sorento, where her other brothers and sisters had stayed.

She had this house built to honor her heritage and to remind them of the home they left back on the Italian coast.

She knew that the people in Maple Bay didn't like her very much. She was an immigrant who built the largest house in the area and decorated it with majestic furnishings she found in San Francisco. The townspeople sneered at her as the wagons of lavish furnishings made their way up to her home over the small road through town.

She was the easy victim to accuse.

But was there even a crime? As far as I could remember, no bodies were ever found. Perhaps the missing people decided to leave. Children playing on the edge of the cliffs could have fallen and drowned in the turbulent ocean below. If there were no bodies – was there really a crime? You would think that by now, some kind of remains would have been discovered if these people fell victim to a homicidal maniac.

But the thing I found in her writing was her innocence and her fear that she and her family would be harmed.

"I think I found something." Ralph or H.H. Holmes called from near the doorway. "It's definitely out of place."

"What is it?" Sara started moving towards him.

I closed the book and hid it once again in the pocket of my dress.

"It's a condom wrapper."

"Good for you, Betty." I giggled.

"It's a Magnum XL." Ralph snorted loudly. "Someone got lucky."

"Does a condom mean it's one of the people who killed during or after sex? I mean, Ted Bundy was a victim here." Listening to Sara's voice coming from behind the hood made me grin. It just was too many kinds of wrong.

"Ted Bundy, Peter Moore, Lane Parker, Betsy Roman, and myself were all known for having sex with their victims before or after killing them."

"Oh, God! After? Really?"

“Sadly, yes. That’s how they caught Lane Parker. He was having sex with someone he had just strangled with his belt in a bathroom stall.” I nodded. “He may be one of the sickest of them all. He did some pretty messed up things.”

“How big was his dick? Was it Magnum XL big?”

“Actually, yes. It was.” I reached out, and he handed me the wrapper. “Wouldn’t it be hilarious if this wasn’t actually a clue?”

“But it is. I’ve known Betty for over twenty years. That’s not hers.” Ralph snorted snidely. He really annoyed the piss out of me.

“If it was Betty’s, she’d be proud of the fact, trust me.” Sara chuckled.

“What the fuck!” Ralph started twitching. It was like he suddenly had ants in his pants, and he fell to the ground. “That’s… What the fuck was that! Did I just get bit?”

He bent over and pulled up his shirt to reveal – yep, you guessed it – a round circle with a triangle in a small red welt upon his back.

The clock chimed, and the lights went out. A loud laugh from within the room made chills run down my spine.

When the lights went on – the three of us stood alone. But we had not been. I was sure of it.

This mark, once again. Now I knew this was something that I had to answer. But this wasn’t something that had an easy one. Maybe it didn’t have one at all.

Chapter Seven

THE LOVER AND THE GIGOLO

“You have to be fucking kidding me?” Betty looked totally destroyed.

“It really fucking hurt, Betty. It was like someone was carving into me with their fingernail, almost like I was being scratched.” Ralph whined. I may have had an issue with him, but I knew that it had hurt him.

“Parker said it felt like he was being burned. A fingernail scratch could feel like a burn.” I was trying to find a rational explanation. There were only the three of us in that room, but that laugh came from the other side of the room. I mean, it was dark… Was there a door we hadn’t seen or a hidden passage? But how could that person have… They couldn’t have. When Ralph felt it, the lights were still on.

“Vicki!” Jensen called, and I knew something was wrong. “Cory wants to talk to you.”

I hauled up my dress and took off towards my bestie with a chestie in a dress. Cory was slumped down against the wall, and his face was as white as a ghost. I knelt down beside him.

“Will you look at something, please?” He said tightly.

My stomach fell. “Did you get scratched by something?”

“Yes.” He gasped. “A circle with a…”

“Triangle?”

“Yes. It’s the same symbol that you asked me to look for.” His whine made me want to punch whoever was responsible. You did not hurt my Cory!

“The same thing has now happened to Ralph and Parker. Is it on your back?”

“No… Look.” He hiked up his dress, and there underneath his pantyhose was the symbol scratched into his thigh. “It fucking hurt. I almost cracked my head open.”

“What the fuck is that. We were together in the ballroom, and suddenly Cory was just going down.” Jensen looked like he was about to break something.

“He carried me back. He’s my big strong man.” Cory said soothingly.

“Will you stop acting like everything’s ok, baby?” Jensen grabbed his hand and pointed to his thigh. “What the fuck is that?”

“I was scratched by a ghost. I saw this kind of thing happen on Ghost Search- Houses Of Hell. It’s an angry spirit that’s pissed off. It has to be. I mean, the only explanation I can think of, anyway.”

“Really? Does it?” I huffed. I didn’t believe in the supernatural, but this… All of this was something I couldn’t easily explain.

“Don’t tell me that…” Betty came over and slumped against the wall. “Well, I guess the fucking parties over, and no one even solved the mystery.”

“Looks like we have another mystery to solve, doesn’t it?” Jensen was standing at attention. I knew that he was on alert and was ready to protect Cory at any cost. But how can you protect someone from something you don’t even understand.

“It’s a ghost. I know it.” Cory pleaded.

“I think you watch too much television.” I chided.

Betty chuckled. “Oh, this place is totally haunted, but I’ve never experienced anything like this.”

“What do you mean it’s haunted?” Jensen scoffed.

“I’ve heard voices, seen shadows, and have had stuff totally move from where I put it. There’s a reason that all of the Nepoli’s stuff is still right where they left it. If I move it, it suddenly appears right back where it was. I stopped even trying. Even the workers that I had in here said they had stuff disappear and kept feeling like they were being watched. Trust me, we are not alone in this house.”

I shook my head with disapproval. “Science has never proven that the supernatural exists. It’s…”

“Science hasn’t disproved it either, Vic…ki.” Cory scrunched up his handsome face.

I sighed and slowly stood up as fast as this fucking beast of a dress would let me. “I guess that’s true. I’m stumped.”

“What do we do?” Betty asked again.

“What’s going on. We’re all standing over there, and Ralph said he was scratched?” Harper came over and stood beside us. “You alright, Cory?”

“He was scratched too. No one else was in the room with us. It just… appeared on his skin.”

Harper scratched his head. “That happens with ghosts sometimes. People have reported being scratched in a lot of haunted houses.”

“You believe in ghosts?” My mouth fell agape. I was shook, honey.

“Hell, yeah. My grandparents lived in their grandparent's home, and I used to have this kid I would play with. Scared my mother to death. She had played with the same girl when she was a kid, too. Told me that it was my grandma’s sister who died when they were young. I even told them her name and described her. I wasn’t allowed to spend nights over there after that. Ghosts are all around us.”

“The world is upside down,” I said flatly - trying to catch my bearings.

“The world is full of things we can’t see and unknowns that have no logical explanation. I should have guessed you weren’t a believer.” Harper

smirked.

“I can’t believe we never talked about this,” I muttered.

“You two bicker like an old married couple.” Betty snorted.

I stiffened.

“So what should we do. I mean, the game has to be over. I don’t feel like it’s safe now that this is happening. Maybe we should all go to the others and have a cocktail to take the edge off. I mean, I did hire a bartender.” Betty glanced around at the others. “Aren’t we missing someone?”

I looked around and thought about who should have been left. Only Hank and Dennis should have been absent and…

“Where’s whoever is playing the witch – The Magician?” I asked suddenly.

“Oh! Where is she?” She glanced around the foyer. “Yeah… She is not here, and that’s…”

“Who is it, Betty?” Harper asked, sliding into his authority.

“Jasmine from the library.” Betty looked scared. “Do you think she’s ok? Can I get sued over this?”

“Maybe we need to split up into small groups and search for her. It was your game – do you know where she was supposed to be?”

A knock at the front door made us all jump out of our skin.

“I’ll get it.” Jensen looked over at Harper, who nodded back to him.

We all watched as Jensen answered the door, and standing there with her costume in her hands was Jasmine.

“Betty! I’m so sorry. I got caught in traffic coming across the bridge. There was a bad accident. I did try to call.”

“You haven’t been here?” I asked, completely confused.

“No. I’m sorry. Did I mess up the game?”

“Who is under that witch costume, and where the fuck is she?” Cory jumped up to his feet.

“I think it’s time to find out.” Harper gritted his teeth. There was nothing hotter than a man in a speedo who was about to lay down the law.

I think I now understood why people had fainting couches.

Chapter Eight

THE MAGICIAN

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t… I’m just…”

“Betty, I don’t think anyone blames you,” Cory said so sweetly that I wanted to wrap him up in my arms.

“Well, I blame myself. I had no idea this would… I mean, what the fuck is actually happening?”

“We have someone unknown to us in the house, and we need to see who is actually under that witch's costume.” Jensen’s deep voice held an authority that made people listen.

“Exactly. We need to search in a couple groups. We know that whoever has been here with us under that witch mask is not Jasmine – who was invited and supposed to play the part of the witch.”

“Magician.” Betty covered her mouth quickly. “Sorry, I just put a lot of work into this and…”

“Would it help you if I solved your mystery, Betty?” I smirked.

“You know who it was?”

“Of course.” I walked over to Jensen. “Cory was your next victim, wasn’t he?”

“How did you know?” He grinned.

“There was no death at the last blackout. Only someone who was dealing with something else wouldn’t have marked the next victim. Also,

the extra large condom," Jensen blushed. "and the knife and black glove. Betty did a fair bit of research for this game. They were nice clues, Betty."

"I'm just glad someone was able to…" Betty scrunched up her face with emotion. "We have a bigger problem now, don't we? Someone we don't know is in my house."

"And we need to find them right away." Harper took back control. "Hank, Jessica… I still can't believe our sweet bookstore owner was underneath that Jack the Ripper costume… Parker and Jensen should be in one group."

"Cory is with me." Jensen's demand was palpable. He wasn't going to let him out of his sight.

"Let Cory stay with me, Jensen. I don't think I'm up for this, and I would like to talk to Betty if that's ok." I wanted him to know that Cory would be ok. Jensen nodded.

"That means that Tammy, Sara, Ralph, and Amy are with me. Jensen, you take the upstairs, and we'll search down here." Harper's face had that look that he only got when he was worried. "Vicki? You sure you're alright?"

"Yes. I think I am, Harper. Be careful. Victor will kill me if anything happens to you." I winked.

"You know I will."

The two groups went off, and I grabbed Betty's hand. "Come with us."

I led her over to the couch and pulled the book from within my dress.

"I found this. Was this some kind of red herring you set up in the library?" I handed it to her, and she looked at it as if she had never seen it before.

"No… What is it?"

"What you are holding is a piece of Maple Bay history and possibly the only record of Lisandre Nepoli's life here in our town. Betty… It absolves her of the disappearance of the missing people. She was terrified. I read part

of it and what it says… She was innocent, and this town labeled her a murderous witch."

"Really?" Betty looked surprised. "Lisandre's diary, huh?"

"I think that her story needs to be told, and I can't think of a better platform for it to come out than with you."

"Well, I do have the ear of everyone… People seem to like my human interest stories. You should come back and…"

"Focus, please." I rolled my eyes. "You can set this town straight on who Lisandre was."

"Maybe her spirit is still here. Perhaps this would help her be at rest?" Cory added kindly. "I mean unless you like living in a haunted house."

"Not after tonight." She said steely. "Do you think there's more of her diaries up there?"

"I think that book collection is worth a small fortune, Betty? Lisandre's diaries alone should be considered priceless. There could be."

"This one was sticking out of the bookcase as if someone wanted us to find it. Like it needed to be seen. Maybe it was her ghost wanting her story – her true story to be told. Maybe she's tired of being the villain and wants everyone to know that she was actually the victim in this case."

"Maybe… Some strange things happen around here, that's for sure. But I've never been scared. It's like… maybe you're right, Cory? Maybe she just wants peace. The bitch deserved it if what you say is true."

"It is. Lisandre was innocent of the crimes that made her an outcast. Let's be honest. No bodies were ever recovered, Betty. What are the chances of that?"

"I understand. The missing people were all from within town too. This house, back then, would have been a trek for anyone. It's miles away and through the mountains. Back then, there would have only been one road, just like we have now. Walking would have taken someone hours."

“Then tell her story, Betty. This poor lady, ghost or not, which I still don’t really believe is possible, deserves to have the record set straight.”

“I will read it tomorrow and make it my leading story over the weekend. You know, for someone who thinks her shit don’t stink – you’re not as bad as I wanted you to be.” Betty nodded seriously. “You’re alright, Vicki Dean.”

“I think you’re pretty kick-ass yourself, Betty Davis.”

Harper and Jensen brought their groups back.

There was no one else in the house.

Betty went and spent the night somewhere else.

This was a mystery that couldn’t be solved.

Chapter Nine

THE COUNTESS AND THE LIFEGUARD

“You really believe in ghosts?” I reached over and patted his bare leg as he drove us home.

“Not everything can have a rational explanation, Vic.” He sounded like he was talking to a child. I didn’t blame him – he knew that I was the type of person who wouldn’t believe in the supernatural. I needed things to belong in a box. Ghosts… didn’t.

“I… I have a hard time believing in something that can’t be proved.”

“If you saw a candle stick move across a table of its own volition, and there was no one near it – what would you think?”

“I’d check for wires or underneath the table to see if it was on some kind of pully system.” I chuckled.

“And when you found nothing? Let’s say you go and pick it up and search for your real-world explanation and find nothing. Then what?”

I shrugged. “A shift in the magnetic pole?”

Harper reached over and stroked my face. “You know me, Vic. I am not a crazy person who runs around and thinks that everything they see has something to do with ghosts or the supernatural. But I tell you, I have experienced it with my own eyes.”

“I know…” I sighed. “If you say that’s what it was – then I have to think what you say is true. But that is just… It’s hard for me.”

“I know, babe. But tonight… I think that there was something there with us. You really should have said something to me earlier, though.”

“What was I going to say, Harper? I didn’t know it was… But when Cory was sitting there, and I saw the welts… scratches on his leg… I was at a loss.”

“I think that you did exactly what needed to be done, babe. You helped Lisandre clear her name. Maybe that was what she needed.”

“Restless spirits… Maybe. I guess we’ll see.”

“Home. I want to take a very hot shower and climb into bed. Please join me.”

“I’ve been staring at your package all night along with the rest of the town. I’m definitely getting in that shower with you.” I chuckled.

Harper stopped the car, and we both got out. I reached into my pocket to pull out my cell phone, so I could unlock our door, and my hand found something else hidden in the folds of my dress.

I wrapped my fingers around the warm oblong object and pulled it free.

A stone, flat on one side. I turned it over and almost passed out.

A circle with a triangle inside it…

How had that…

It didn’t matter. Someone could have been playing me all night. Maybe they weren’t? Maybe I didn’t need to always know the answer?

Hopefully – if it was real – I did my small part to right a wrong this town did many years ago to a woman searching for a new life.

Maybe I was becoming a believer in something else?

If it was real – I hoped Lisandre was finally at peace. I placed the stone on the edge of my porch and shut the door behind me.

Harper was waiting, and he took my hand.

I was at peace too.

The End

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ABOUT SHANE K MORTON

Shane lives in Studio city with his husband and their fur baby, Bette Davis. His novels include: The Trouble With Off-Campus Housing, Private Waterloos, The Year of the Cock, Fault Lines, Bluegrass Boys Series and The Point Pleasant Holiday Series. His Dark Romance books, written under Sean Azinsalt, include: It's in My Blood, Bound, Dark Eros. When not writing, Shane can usually be found at a film festival or performing cabaret in a dark dive bar.

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